

The Emperor's Hand--First Chapter

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Summary: The story of Mara Jade, from her early childhood to her mission at Jabba's Palace as the Emperor's Hand.

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PHASE I

20 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE...

The Koraltti family had always lived among asteroids. Mining was their life--it put clothes on their backs and food on their tables. Their children memorized the currents of the asteroid field before they could read; there was never any question as to what they would do when they grew to adulthood. It had been so for nearly a century.

They could not, of course, live in the same asteroid field forever. The first had been mined dry about the time Senator Palpatine was elected Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. The field had orbited a nameless planet in the Outer Rim, and had served the Jades well for seventy years. The family moved to the Kashyyk Asteroid Belt ten years ago, and that is where they stayed. (The Belt orbited Kashyyk's sun, and bore the planet's name only as a reference.)

The business started, and remained, small. It generated enough income to support itself and the family with a bit left over, but never blossomed into a large corporation. They did business with whomever was willing to pay: the newly formed Empire, the Corporate Sector, and various smuggler clans and pirates. The Empire had done business with Koraltti Mining only a few times before, but they always paid well. It was for this reason that Liv Koraltti, current head of the business, was waiting eagerly for the Tyderium-class shuttle to touch down on his home asteroid.

The pilot of that shuttle, Kavid Warso, was waiting eagerly for touchdown as well, but not for the same reason as Liv Koralti. A sound had filled the shuttle cockpit since liftoff, a sound that chilled Kavid to the bone. He knew that once he landed, the owner of that sound would leave, allowing him to relax.

The shuttle landed in the second docking bay of the asteroid, the one reserved for VIP's. (This meant nothing, of course, as the asteroid only had two docking bays and the other was used by the Koralti family. But potential customers had no way of knowing that.) Liv Koralti stepped forward with long, confident strides to meet the Imperial major emerging from the craft.

"Good day, Major," he said, bowing. "I trust you had a safe..." Liv's greeting trailer off as he watched another figure step from the shuttle.

The specter was at least two meters tall, clothed entirely in black. It wore two long capes--one around its waist, and another across its shoulders, surrounding it like a shroud. On its chest were a number of colored, blinking lights, and above that chest was the single most terrifying object Liv had ever seen. The figure wore a helmet/mask, complete with two huge, bulbous eyes and some sort of triangular vent or screen as a mouthpiece. It emitted something--breathing?--in a sick-sounding wheeze, which added to the sense of profound darkness that surrounded the creature.

Realizing that he was staring, Liv brought his eyes back to the major--who was watching him bemusedly--and began again.

"Uh, as I was saying, I hope--"

"Liv Koralti," the major cut him off. "I would like to introduce the Lord Darth Vader, the Emperor's second-in-command."

At this, Liv visibly started. He had heard stories of this Vader, and they were not altogether pleasant.

"...Vader," the major was saying, "this is the miner Liv Koralti, father of the child you seek."

Father of the child you seek? Liv immediately understood why Vader was here. 'He knows about Mara,' he thought frantically, 'and he wants her.'

Panicked, he tried to deny it. "Child, major?" he asked too quickly. "I have no child. Perhaps you mean by brother Tolar K--"

He was cut off by five invisible fingers squeezing at his throat. He looked around for his attacker in bewilderment, but saw only his visitors.

"I find your version of honesty...disturbing, miner."

Liv, still struggling, looked over at the black creature who had spoken, and saw him holding up a clenched fist. It's finally happened.

"All right, Vader," the major snapped. "Enough. He'll tell us where she is."

The dark lord shot a look at him, as if contemplating his asphyxiation as well, but apparently decided against it and released Liv.

The miner gasped and fell to the docking bay floor, taking deep breaths of the sweet, clean air, until the major hauled him up by his jacket.

"So now you know what we want, Koralti," he barked. "Make no mistake, we will use any means necessary to get it. Take us to the girl."

Liv looked at Vader, felt those fingers rest again on his throat. He reached up involuntarily, then stopped himself. If I resist, they'll just slaughter everyone here until they find her. Defeated, he turned his back. "This way."

He could not have seen the crooked smile beneath Lord Vader's helmet.

"Will the Empire pay us lots of money?"

Arai Koralti glanced up from her data pad at her daughter. "We hope so, sweetie." She leaned forward. "What are you watching out there?"

Mara looked back at her mother from her post at the nursery window. "I'm finding Kashyyk's moons!"

Arai smiled. "Do you want me to help you?"

Mara grinned back. "No that's okay," she said, in the lilt that only a six-year-old can have. "I can do it!"

The smile stayed on her face as Arai settled back into her Conformochair. Mara was her pride and joy. She had her father's features--red hair, green eyes, tall frame--but her mother's temperament. Always wanting to know more, always wanting to do everything. That personality would serve her well as an adult.

"Hey, Mommy, look! I found one!" the girl exclaimed, pointing to a green point of light.

Arai squinted, nodded. "So you did! Good job!" Mara beamed at the praise.

Her mother remember the day she gave birth to the child. She had known then, just as every miner knew of their infant, that Mara would eventually become a strong, confident spacewalker, as she and Liv were. So far, her greatest hopes had been realized.

Arai heard a gasp, and looked up to see Mara crying. Surprised, she hurried to comfort her. "What's wrong, honey?"

Mara looked up, stricken. "There's something wrong with Daddy!" she sobbed. Arai hugged her close. Mara had begun to see things about two years ago, and her ability had become stronger ever since. They had no idea why or what it was, and they lacked the resources to find out, but she was always right.

The child sat bolt upright. "They're coming here!" she said, and looked at her mother. "Don't let them take me away, Mommy!"

Arai looked into her child's eyes and saw fear. "Don't worry, Mara. No one will take you away from me, I promise. I'll go find Daddy." She left the window seat and headed for the com unit, but the door opened before she reached it. When Liv walked through, she rushed to meet him, but stopped when she saw the Imperial officer. "Liv, what--?"

"They're here for Mara," he said in a low voice. He looked at his daughter with all the love a father can have. "They know."

"Daddy, Daddy!" Mara cried, running to him. "Don't let them take me away!" Liv scooped her up and tried to comfort her, but the major interrupted.

"While this is all very touching, Koraltti, Lord Vader is running on a very tight schedule. I will take the child now." He reached out to grab her, but Arai stepped in his way.

"You will not." Her voice was quiet, but her eyes could have melted wood.

The major sighed. "I do not want to use force, madam, but I will be leaving with that girl." He smiled at Mara, a grotesque caricature.

Liv, hardened by his wife's conviction, said "I'm afraid, not, Major. We will not willingly give you our child." He looked at his wife, and there were tears in his eyes. They both knew what happened to those who defied the Empire. Goodbye, she mouthed.

The major shrugged in mock resignation. "Very well, then," he said, and left the room.

Liv and Arai stared at each other, neither daring to hope that the ordeal was over. Even, Mara, still in her father's arms, quieted.

Then the invisible fingers tightened, first around Liv's throat, then Arai's, cutting off airflow and leaving them helpless. Liv fell to his knees, and turned to look at his child. "Never forget," he managed to choke out, "that...I love...you...." Mara heard a wet pop, and watched as her father's body fell to the floor. "Daddy!" she screamed. She turned to her mother; watched her smile, then collapse.

"MOMMY!"

The door opened then, and the smiling major entered. Mara looked at him, then at her dead parents, and began to scream.

PHASE II

Imperial Center, once known as Coruscant, was an awe-inspiring sight from space. An entire planet covered in glistening metal would give anyone pause, particularly one with a romantic soul. This certainly applied to the pilot Kavid Warso, who took his hands off the shuttle controls, just for a moment, to gaze at the man-made wonder.

It was the Imperial major who jolted him back to reality. "Oh, do wake up, Warso. Now is not the time to daydream."

Kavid sighed, and resumed piloting the shuttle down. "Sorry, Major Tarkin."

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, stood before his master, waiting. The Emperor would not be rushed, and this Vader knew very well.

Finally, the Emperor spoke. "So you have the girl."

"Yes, master."

"Excellent. She is in stasis?"

"Those were your orders, my master."

The Emperor swiveled his throne to face his apprentice. "So they were. Here are my next orders: I want you to wipe her memory, save her ability to walk, talk, eat, and so forth. Give her a new name--Mara Jade--in place of Mara Koraltti." His eyes sharpened. "We can't have her finding her family. When you have finished, bring her before me."

Vader bowed. "Yes, my master."

"Be sure the memory wipe is complete, Vader," the Emperor said as the dark lord turned to go. "She must have no idea who she is, where she is, or what happened to her. And be...gentle...if you can. We cannot afford to have her afraid of you."

Vader inclined his head slightly. "As you wish."

Mara Koraltti awoke on a gray bunk, in a small, gray room. 'That's

weird. How come everything's so ugly?' She heard a low voice next to her, asking her who she was. She turned toward it, and her breath caught. A black, scary thing was sitting next to her bunk. She shrank away from it, and asked, "Where am I?"

The thing ignored her question, and asked again who she was.

Mara racked her brain for an answer, and found nothing but a name. "I'm Mara Jade," she said finally. "Who are you?"

Again, the thing ignored her. "Where are you from?" it asked her.

The girl could not remember. "I don't know," she said.

"Why are you here?"

Mara still could not remember. "I don't know."

The black thing nodded once. "Follow me, " it said, and began to walk down the gray corridor.

"Why?" she wanted to know. "Who are you? Where am I?"

The thing kept walking.

Mara started to cry. "How come I can't remember?" she screamed after the thing. "Where am I? Where's Mommy and Daddy?" She slumped onto the bunk, sobbing.

The thing immediately turned around. "Who are your mother and father?" it demanded tersely.

Mara stared up at it and thought hard. "I don't...remember!" she yelled at it. "I don't remember anything!" 'I don't like this thing. It doesn't tell me anything!'

The thing knelt down next to her bunk. "Come with me," it said, "and you will remember."

At this, Mara cautiously stood and grabbed the thing's hand. "How come you have a scary head?" she asked it, trying to be brave.

The thing looked at her hand in his, then kept walking. "It is a mask," it said, "that enables me to breath."

Mara looked confused. "What's...inabals?"

The thing looked down at her, but did not answer.

"Don't you know?"

The thing kept walking, its long strides far outdistancing hers.

"Hey!" Mara yelled. "Don't walk so fast!"

It slowed down without comment.

Mara began to feel very afraid of the scary black thing and its ugly

mask. 'What if it eats me for lunch?' She began to cry.

The black thing stopped, and knelt beside her. "There is no reason to be afraid of me, Mara Jade. Do you understand?"

Mara cringed away but nodded. "Uh-huh."

In the throne room, the Emperor waited. It had taken him a year to obtain this child; he could be patient for a few more minutes.

Darth Vader had told him of the child when they first began working with Koraltti Mining. Vader was on board the shuttle as a scout. The Sith Lord had felt a concentration of Force energy on the asteroid. It was unfocused, untrained, but it was strong. The Emperor later discovered that Liv Koraltti had a daughter, and concocted a plan. Darth Vader was far too valuable to waste on the petty disturbances that continually plagued the Empire. If another could be used, strong in the Force but not so much as Vader, and trained, the dark lord would be free to deal with the larger threats. One year after the discovery, the Emperor sent his lieutenant to take the child, then wipe Koraltti Mining from the universe. Vader had carried out his instructions to the letter.

The turbolift door opened, interrupting his thoughts. Darth Vader stepped out, with a child in hand. The Emperor immediately invaded her mind, and found it empty of personal history. He nodded. "Excellent work, Lord Vader," he commended. "You may leave us." Vader bowed and stepped back into the turbolift.

The Emperor waited for the doors to close, then gestured to Mara. "Come here, child."

The girl took a few tentative steps toward him. "Who are you?"

The Emperor rose and strode to where she stood. "'Who am I?'" he asked. "I am the Emperor of the galaxy, but you may call me Palpatine."

Mara's eyes grew large. "You're king of the whole galaxy?"

Palpatine sat on the floor and motioned for her to do the same. "I am. Who are you?"

"I'm Mara Jade." She frowned. "How come I can't remember anything?"

"Someone stole your memory," the Emperor said gravely, "and then he died."

"How come?"

"I don't know," said Palpatine.

Mara seemed to think that one over. "Oh," she said finally. "Where am

I?"

"You, my dear, are on Imperial Center, in my palace."

Mara looked shocked. "This is a palace?"

Palpatine smiled at her. "It is indeed."

"How come it's so ugly?"

The Emperor hadn't expected that. "I don't know."

"How come I'm in it?"

"Well, let me ask you a question," Palpatine said. "How would you like to see every world in the galaxy?"

"Yeah!" Mara shouted, jumping up. "Let's go!"

"Wait, wait wait," Palpatine told her, grabbing her wrist. "You will, but first, you must learn to hear me."

"I can hear you," Mara said, confused.

The Emperor closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them. "Did you hear that?" he asked quizzically.

Mara sat back down, frustrated. "You didn't say anything."

"Ah, but I did. You must learn to hear me with your mind, as well as your ears," he explained.

The little girl looked at him. "Okay," she said carefully.

PHASE III

10 YEARS LATER...

Her master woke her before the alarm that morning, summoning her to him. She dressed quickly and strode down the now familiar corridor. She passed a delicate-looking girl, and recalled her name to mind. Roganda something-or-other. One of her master's concubines. Mara paid her no mind; she was not in the mood to converse with a plaything.

She remembered the first day she saw these walls, ten years ago, and smiled. She had been so frightened of Vader, then! Her smile faded a bit as she realized that she still had no memory of what had happened to her.

She reached the turbolift and started up. 'Why would Palpatine call me this early?'

The lift doors opened. "Mara Jade!" a voice boomed from somewhere. She knew her master was here, but she did not see him. She grinned. 'All right, then, Master. If that's how you want to play it.' Mara

concentrated on his presence, and, a few minutes later, he appeared on his throne.

"Excellent!" he crowed.

Mara knelt, as she always did. "My master."

"I have summoned you here for a reason, Mara Jade," he said. "I am satisfied that your training is complete. There is nothing more you can learn on Imperial Center."

Mara stared at him, searching his face. Could he mean...

"You have the right to bear the title for which I trained you," he continued. "And so I ask you: Who are you?"

Mara stood straight, her head high, her soul filled with elation.

"I am Mara Jade, the Emperor's Hand!"

End
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